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ABSTRACT

A group of voluntarily childless, maried women (N=38) were compared with a group of married women who planned to have children (N=32) and were similar in age, education, and socio-economic background. The two groups were compared on measures of three personality trait clusters which pertained to social adjustment, mental health, and sex-role identity. Findings did not support the expectations, based on the literature, that the voluntarily childless women would be less well socialized, more neurotic, and have poorer feminine identifications than the women who planned to have children. However, the expectation that the voluntarily childless women would be more androgynous in their sex-role identity than the women who planned to have children was borne out by study results. (Author)

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PSYCHOLOGICAL CORRELATES OF VOLUNTARY CHILDLESSNESS IN MARRIED WOMEN

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Psychological Correlates of Voluntary Childlessness in Married Women

This report is about women who have made a voluntary decision never to have children. Despite demographic findings (Brown, 1976) that birth rates have declined in recent years, it should be noted that these decreasing fertility rates do not reflect an increase in the numbers of couples who choose to remain permanently childless. Rather, the reduced birth rates seem to reflect later marriages, postponement of first births, and the choice for fewer children per family. Similarly, the recent popularization of the "child-free" choice in the media (Rivers, 1975; Whelan, 1975) and the work of such groups as Zero Population Growth and the Association for Non-parents, may have succeeded in making the choice against parenthood a less troubled one for those who do choose it; but again, the statistics do not yet seem to indicate that there has been any increase in the percentage of married couples who ultimately choose to remain permanently childless. At least, up until two years ago, this percentage had remained fairly constant in the United States and Canada throughout the twentieth century, at about 5% (This 5% approximation

is based on the work of sociologist Veevers at the University of Western Ontario, 1972, 1973a, 1973b. 1973c, 1973d, 1974; and the work of Pohlman, 1970, done at the University of the Pacific - the 5% estimate required the development of an elaborate formula for interpreting census data). It must be kept in mind, then, that the focus of this study is a very small minority of married women, a minority who have chosen to deviate from the time-honored, near-universal norm of motherhood, a norm that has always had the full support of all the major religious and socio-political institutions in all societies across time and place.

So it should surprise no one that such a minority is not held in high regard by the general, lay public: and in fact, attitude surveys carried out at various points in time, from the early 1900's to the mid 1970's, have suggested that women who choose to remain childless are variously assumed to be selfish, irresponsible, immature, abnormal, neurotic, and even unnatural! (Popenoe, 1936; Rabin, 1965; Rainwater, 1965; Veevers, 1973a.) One purpose of this study thus became an attempt to determine to what extent these popular attitudes represented popular <u>wisdom</u>, and to what extent they represented nothing more than popular prejudice.

It has sometimes been said that the great artistic and literary geniuses are among our most astute and most profound natural psychologists. Among the great playwrights and novelists who have offered observations on their heroine's attitudes toward motherhood, are Ibsen, in his portrayal of Hedda Gabbler; and Tolstoy, in his portrayal of Anna Karenina. Both Hedda Gabbler and Anna Karenina are tragically flawed heroines - and both are observed to express negative attitudes toward having children. Hedda Gabbler, who pronounces that she wants no child, no part of anything that will make a claim on her, is portrayed as a merciless and vengeful woman - a woman who had cruelly taunted a classmate as a child, simply because that child had enviable golden hair; and in later life, she willfully burned the only copy of her former lover's manuscript, simply because it had been inspired by his love for a woman other than Hedda herself. Furthermore Ibsen makes it clear, by Hedda's words as she burns the manuscript, that the manuscript symbolizes for her the love-child of its creator and "the other woman". Ibsen seems to present Hedda's negative attitude toward children as one more convincing detail in his delineation of the character of a powerfully evil woman.

As for Tolstoy's portrayal of Anna Karenina, although Anna did have children, she appeared ultimately to feel nothing but regret for having created two human lives. In her own words,

> What was my reason given me for, if I am not to use it to avoid bringing unhappy beings into the world? I should always feel I had wronged these unhappy children...If they do not exist, at any rate they are not unhappy; while if they are unhappy, I alone should be to blame for it.
>
> Tolstoy, from Anna Karenin

Hedda Gabbler and Anna Karenina both ended their lives in violent suicide.

Having found that not only the lay public, but also at least two literary giants, apparently held such negative or hopeless views of women who did not want children, I finally turned to the psychological and psychiatric literature to see what light mental health professionals might shed on my topic.

Voluntary childlessness has not fared much better in the opinions of many mental health professionals than it has with the general public or with literary genius. Some mental health professionals have suggested that parenthood is a normal developmental stage, with the implication that failure to procreate represents a failure in normal development. This view finds

support in the work of Erik Erikson (1964, 1968), Judith Kestenberg (1975), Therese Benedek (1959, 1975), and others. Still others have put forth a view of parenthood as the fulfillment of a biological need, a need derived through evolutionary processes. This view was suggested in a 1974 article by psychologist Judith Bardwick. Bardwick's evolutionary view of parenting would seem to lend credence to the popularly expressed opinion, that failure to achieve parenthood goes against nature itself.

Early psychoanalytic theory, as well, held that procreation, and mature parenting were the ultimate aims of normal psycho-sexual development (Freud, 1905, 1932, 1940); and although psychoanalytic theory on this and other points has undergone significant revisions, the current Psychoanalytic Associations in Europe and the United States are, right now, engaged in vigorous debate concerning whether the choice against motherhood might possibly be seen as a deviation from the norm, but one which could still fit within a broadened view of healthy psychological functioning (Brody, 1975; Galenson, 1976).

Although, very recently, a few studies have been reported which involved empirical observation of vol-

untarily childless couples (Gustavus and Henley, 1971; Malmquist, 1971; Silka and Kiesler, 1976; Kaltrieder and Margolis, 1977), many of the professional judgements concerning voluntary childlessness, to date, have been based on generalizations which were made from astute observations of individuals in psychotherapy (Ovesey and Person, 1956; Nagera, 1975; Flarsheim, 1975), or on logical extrapolations from theory (Horney, 1973; Abraham, 1974; Deutsch, 1974), but not grounded in empirical observations of voluntarily childless women outside of a clinical setting.

Both the attitude surveys and the professional literature, furthermore, seem to suggest that parenthood is judged to be a more critical ingredient in the psychological health and social adjustment of women than of men. In many cases, in fact, motherhood is accepted as the very definition of womanhood, or as the absolute equivalence of femininity. On the basis of the literature on childlessness, as well as of the literature on normal female development, then, a group of hypotheses were formulated about how a group of women who chose to remain childless might be expected to differ from a group of women who expressed the normal desires and plans to have children.

The personality variables which on the basis of the literature could be expected to distinguish voluntarily childless women from other women are perhaps most clearly and succinctly stated in a paragraph from Judith Bardwick's 1971 book entitled Psychology of Women: A Study of Bio-cultural Conflicts. In that book, Bardwick stated, and I quote:

> In the reality of current socialization and expectations, I regard women who are not motivated to achieve the affiliative role with husband and children as not normal. The psychological needs that evolve from the body, the internalization of cultural expectation as part of the self-concept, and the pressure from parents and peers all converge to make marriage and children, love and nurturance, the most important of feminine needs. When these are absent, denied, or defended against, my clinical observation is that there is evidence for pathological levels of anxiety, a distorted sex identity, and a neurotic solution. (1971, p. 162)

The general expectation seems to be that women who voluntarily forego motherhood will be less well socialized - that is that they will be less likely to have internalized the general values of their society, since they have not internalized the specific value of motherhood; further the expectation is that they will be more anxious and more neurotic than other women; and that they will be less feminine in their identifi-

cation than most other women as well. The specific hypotheses that were developed for evaluation in this study were grouped in three clusters, then, pertaining to (1) the level of socialization, (2) the degree of anxiety and neurotic adjustment, and (3) the extent of feminine sex role identity.

In terms of socialization, would the Non-mothers be less responsible than other women? Would they be less well socialized? Would they function at a lower level of social maturity? To answer these questions, the California Psychological Inventory's Responsibility, and Socialization, scales were used, as well as the Gough Maturity Index which was derived from the California Psychological Inventory (Megargee, 1972).

In terms of neurotic adjustment, would the Non-mothers have a higher level of anxiety than other women? Would they be more rigid and unstable? To answer these questions, the Levanthal Anxiety scale, derived from the California Psychological Inventory, was used; as well as the California Psychological Inventory's Flexibility scale. The Flexibility scale is understood to identify psychological rigidity at the low end of the scale, emotional instability at the higher end of the scale, and adaptive flexibility

in those who score in the middle range of the scale.

Finally, in terms of sex-role identification, the study was set up to answer the question of whether the Non-mother's group would tend to have a distorted or sex-reversed identity in more cases than among other women. Would they for instance express more masculine personality traits and interests, and fewer feminine ones? To answer these questions, three different instruments were used in an effort to tap different aspects of sex-role identification, at different levels of consciousness. To assess the degree to which each subject more or less consciously embraced and accepted within herself the prevailing cultural or stereotypic feminine interests and attitudes, the California Psychological Inventory's Femininity Scale was used. In addition, the California Psychological Inventory's Dominance Scale and its two Achievement Scales were used - Achievement through Conformity and Achievement through Independence. These scales were included because the traits they are intended to measure are stereotypically associated differentially with masculinity and femininity.

In order to answer the question concerning the unconscious sex-role identity of voluntarily childless women, the Franck Drawing Completion Test was used

(Franck and Rosen, 1949; Bezdek and Madsen). This is a projective, line-drawing test which has been used internationally, and seems to transcend cultural stereotypes in that it is scored on the basis of formal attributes of the completed drawings rather than on the basis of content alone. The Franck Drawing Test has been shown to yield significantly different scores for male and female groups in several countries, and has also distinguished high and low feminine identification subgroups within same-sex groups (Lansky, 1964; McClelland and Watt, 1968; Wilsnack, 1973, 1975; Strodtbeck, Moody and Yu, 1974).

In undertaking the measurement of sex-role identification I was aware - with the help of the Broverman's et al (1975), and Stricker's more recent (1977) commentary - that measures of masculinity or femininity are still a subject of controversy, due to concerns that social stereotypes and cultural biases will be built into psychological research, unrecognized, through the bias built into the instrumentation being used. In an attempt to content with this difficulty, one additional test of masculinity-femininity was included, and that was the Bem Sex-Role Inventory (BSRI).

The Bem Sex-Role Inventory is a test based on the

assumption that masculinity and femininity are not mutually exclusive within a given personality (Bem, 1974). Thus, on this instrument, a score indicating that a subject is "less feminine" than others does not necessarily mean that the subject is "more masculine". The test yields masculinity and femininity scores which are independently variable. It also yields an Androgyny score which pertains to the relationship between the self-endorsement of masculine and feminine traits within a given subject.

The Bem Sex-Role Inventory therefore differs from most other masculinity-femininity measures in that its masculinity and femininity scales vary independently, and in that it permits a comparison of the masculine and feminine traits endorsed within a single subject of either sex. The relative strength of masculine and feminine traits within an individual is expressed through the Androgyny score.

Correlations between the masculinity and femininity scales on the Bem Sex-Role Inventory (BSRI) and other tests of masculinity and femininity have been found to be very low. Bem (1974) interprets these poor correlations as an indication "that the BSRI is measuring an aspect of sex roles not directly tapped"

(p. 160) by the other measures.

The theoretical rationale for using measures of flexibility/rigidity, and a measure of anxiety, in the assessment of neurotic adjustment comes from psychoanalytic formulations of neurosis (Fenichel, 1945) and adaptation (Hartmann, 1967). Stoller's (1968) conceptualizations concerning gender identity provided the theoretical basis for using two or more measures of femininity intended to assess sexual identity at different levels of consciousness. In this study, the word "femininity" was used to mean those areas of behavior, feelings, thoughts and fantasies which tend to differentiate most females from most males and yet, in Stoller's words, "do not have primarily biological connotations" (Stoller, 1968, p. viii).

Stoller (1968) cites his own and others' research to suggest that the earliest and most basic conviction of a person that she is female or he is male is fully established by the age of two and a half. This basic conviction Stoller calls the "core gender identity." Overlaid on this core conviction, however, are all the life experiences that lead a child to develop feelings, thoughts and fantasies that pertain to this core conviction of being either male or female.

For instance, a girl who has the appropriate core gender identity as a female may develop feelings either of acceptance or rejection about her femaleness; she may feel she is like or unlike other females; and she may feel glad or distressed about being like or unlike other females. These psychic elaborations on the basic core identity are thought to go on intensively at least until the end of adolescence (Stoller, 1968). And every aspect of these thoughts, feelings and fantasies about the core gender identity can be operating at conscious or unconscious levels of psychic functioning.

The specific way in which Stoller's (1968) formulation of gender identity contributed to this study of voluntarily childless women was in raising the possibility that behavioral rejection of the female role of bearing and rearing a child did not necessarily imply rejection of the feminine identification at an unconscious level of functioning. In this study, the measures of masculinity-femininity already described were selected to answer the following questions: would conscious rejection of the mothering role correlate with conscious rejection of most of the other usual female interests and attitudes as well? would it correlate with an acceptance of most of the usual male interests

and attitudes in our society? would it correlate with a less feminine sexual identity at an unconscious level? and would it correlate with a more or less androgynous attitude toward the self, i.e. a greater balance between masculine and feminine traits within the person?

The study was limited to an ex post facto design, comparing two "groups" of women, self-selected for membership in one of the two comparison groups on the basis of their own previously made decisions, either to have, or not to have, children. There was, of course, no possibility of obtaining a random sample of voluntarily childless women since it was known that they made up only about 5% of all married women. An attempt was made simply to find a statistically appropriate number of women who would be eligible to participate in the NON-mothers group, and then to find a comparison group of women planning to have children that would match them in age, education, marital status, and socio-economic background.

The women in both comparison groups had to be married and to feel that their marriage was a stable one. This was to assure that all subjects in both groups would have the usual social sanctions for having children if they so chose, and to minimize the possibility that any

differential results between the two comparison groups that might emerge from the findings might be attributable to relationship difficulties, or problems with intimacy, or attributable to unusual attitudes toward marriage rather than attributable just to the choice for or against parenthood. The women in both comparison groups also were to be limited to the age range from approximately 25 to 35. Under the age of 25, it was felt women could not be expected to have made what would prove to be a permanent decision about childbirth; and much over 35, any differential findings between the comparison groups might begin to be attributable to the after effects of having made a deviant life choice, rather than a personality difference originally associated with the choice.

Further criteria for membership in the Non-mother's group were that they had to have made a fully voluntary decision, and a decision that they felt was permanent. There had to be no known biological factors that would have prevented the couple from becoming biological parents if they had so chosen; and there had to be no known genetic factors that would make it inadvisable for either member of the couple to become a biological parent. The comparison group, which I will call the

Future-mothers, had to have clear and definite plans for having their first child. This meant that they were acceptable as members of the Future-mothers group only if they planned to have their first child within two years of participation in the study. Most women in this group had just recently discontinued the use of birth control or had plans to discontinue within about six months of the study. The purpose of this criterion was to minimize the possibility that there would be vascillators concerning motherhood in this Future-mothers group. Women who were already pregnant or who already had one child or more were also excluded from the study, in order to exclude the confounding effects of pregnancy or actual motherhood.

Out of necessity, the methods by which the subjects were recruited differed somewhat for the two comparison groups, although over half of both groups responded to advertisements or articles in newspapers or bulletin boards. A substantial proportion of the Non-mothers, however, had to be personally solicited. All subjects in both groups were volunteers. Once a subject agreed to take part in the study, a Biographical Questionnaire was mailed out to her, along with an Informed Consent form and on the basis of these biographical question-

naires - which were mailed back to the investigator - subjects were judged as to their eligibility for one of the two comparison groups. There were 128 women who volunteered in response to ads, notices or word-of-mouth campaigns. Of these 128 women, all filled out and mailed back the preliminary questionnaires but only 70 women of the 128 met all the criteria for one of the two comparison groups. Of these 70 eligible women, 38 had decided never to have children, and became the Non-mothers group, while 32 were planning for their first child (but were not pregnant) at the time of the study, and these women became the Future-mothers group.

The Non-mothers ranged in age from 23 to 38 with a mean age of 30. The Future-mothers ranged in age from 24 to 37, with a mean age of 28. The mean number of years married in the Non-mothers group was 6.2 years, and the mean number of years married in the Future-mothers group was 4.3.

Both groups were skewed toward the upper end of the socio-economic scale, and both groups had attained an unusually high educational level. So although the two groups were in no way representative of the general female population, they were statistically indistinguishable from one another on all background variables for

which data was collected. For instance - approximately 80% of both groups had college degrees or greater, and approximately 80% of both groups had attained positions of professional or management status. All women in both groups were working women, although work had not been a criterion for participation. In response to questions about religion, three quarters or more of the women in both groups said that they currently practised their religion of origin "very little" or "not at all".

The investigator met individually with each subject in both groups and administered the pre-selected battery of tests - the test materials of each subject were identified only by number, and were scored blind as to group membership.

Contrary to expectation, it was discovered that there were no significant differences between the two comparison groups on any of the measures pertaining to socialization nor on the measures of neurotic adjustment; and that there were also no significant differences between the two groups on measures of either conscious or unconscious feminine identity. t-tests for independent samples were used to test for significance at the .10 level on each variable. A multi-variate analysis of six key variables yielded no significant

differences between the over-all profiles of the two comparison groups ($F = 1.092$, $df = 6, 63$, $p > .10$). The six variables included in this analysis were as follows: 1) Franck (unconscious) Femininity score; 2) California Psychological Inventory Femininity score (abbreviated by Strodtbeck); 3) Bem Sex-Role Inventory Androgyny score; 4) Levanthal Anxiety score; 5) Gough Social Maturity Index; and 6) California Psychological Inventory Achievement through Independence score.

The only measure on which the two comparison groups did differ significantly was on the Bem Sex-Role Inventory, the measure of psychological androgyny. It was found that the Non-mothers were more likely than the Future-mothers to be Androgynous, or in other words to give equal endorsement in themselves to both "masculine" and "feminine" personality characteristics; correspondingly, it was found that the Future-mothers were more likely than the Non-mothers to describe themselves in terms of exclusively feminine stereotyped personality characteristics ($X^2 = 6.36$, $p < .10$).

In light of the fact that the two groups did not differ on the tests used in this study to measure conscious or unconscious feminine identity, it would seem that the different Androgyny scores attained by the two

groups suggest a different set of conscious values held by the two groups, with the Non-mothers, as a group, tending to place a higher value on self-expression in terms of both masculine and feminine personality traits.

Since the Androgyny measure was the only scale which distinguished the two groups, perhaps a further word about androgyny might be in order.

It is not known what implications psychological androgyny might have for mental health. However, at least one theoretical approach to human development places a high value on androgyny in the healthy personality: according to the Jungian viewpoint, simultaneous self-expression of both masculine and feminine aspects of personality suggests the highest level of psychological functioning (Harding, 1970; Jung, 1968). Sociologist Bernard (1975) has also suggested that psychological androgyny is a very valuable trait she has observed in the current generation of young men and women and that those who are androgynous might have a special and positive contribution to make to society.

Data was also collected for both groups on parents' education and occupation, subject's sibling constellation and birth order in family of origin, subject's

own assessment of what her mother's experience of being a mother was and subject's philosophy of life. Some interesting trends emerged on these variables although none of the differences were significant even at the .10 level. The emergent trends of these background variables will be the topic of a later paper.

The results of this study do not lend credence to the negative judgements of women who have chosen not to have children. On the contrary, the profile of the 38 voluntarily childless women who made up our target sample was of a highly educated and achievement-oriented group of women who have been very successful in their chosen fields of work; who tend to place a high value on the quality of their marital relationships and to be satisfied with their marriages; who score higher than the national norms on tests of Social Maturity, Flexibility, and Achievement through Independence; and whose anxiety level is no greater than that of a similar group of women who do plan to have children. The voluntarily childless women in this study were also no less identified with female values and interests than the women in the comparison group. And on a test of unconscious sexual identity, the scores of the Non-mothers were as "feminine" as those of the comparison group, and

of the national norms.

We must conclude from these findings that, ex post facto, the decision to remain childless is not necessarily associated with social maladjustment or immaturity, nor with neurotic adjustment, nor with poor feminine identification, as these traits were measured in this study. In order to avoid generalizing from our highly selective samples, we can conclude more specifically that at this point in history, in the greater Boston area, and in the upper socio-economic and educational group largely represented in our sample, the choice to remain childless appears to be associated with positive social adjustment and mental health, and with appropriate sexual identity in married women between the ages of 23 and 38, and that the choice against motherhood does not appear to distinguish these women from other women of similar age and background on the traits measured.

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